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# Between a rock and a hard place: ethical dilemmas of local community facilitators doing participatory research projects

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## Abstract

Participatory research is supposed to involve participants in a collective definition of goals and the co-production and sharing of research outputs. However, when articulated through an extended period of time involving a range of local, national and international actors, the practicalities of participatory research means that certain groups and individuals become responsible for taking leading roles, with subsequent ethical dilemmas. In the 'Community-owned solutions for future environmental challenges in the Guiana Shield, South America' (COBRA) project, the participatory research process involves a group of five Indigenous researchers – "the local team" – in charge of carrying out the research on the ground e.g. defining procedures, carrying out community engagement and supporting the communities in analysing and disseminating the material. This local team is, in turn, supported by researchers from a national NGO and foreign academics.

Considerable responsibility has been given to the local team for achieving project outcomes, and freedom in defining project tasks and activities. This paper analyses the multiple ethical dilemmas arising out of this situation, particularly the role of the local team as intermediaries between the wider community and project partners. We highlight the existence of significant mismatches between research expectations, and the ethical processes in operation at community level which are usually established on long-term, tacit and reciprocal relationships. We discuss how local community researchers are challenged with balancing the tensions between these two ethical polarities, while at the same time producing participatory research outcomes that are acceptable by everyone involved.

**Keywords:** participatory research; ethics; community facilitators; local researchers; Indigenous; participatory video; Guyana

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## Introduction

This paper explores our experiences of working with local researchers in a participatory research project and how these local researchers negotiated the messiness of real life with the ideals and principles of academic research. Reflecting on practice and positionality as geographers or academics has grown in the last two decades (e.g. Bondi, 2007; England, 1994; Katz, 1994; Mistry et al., 2009; Raju, 2002; Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007), and this critical reflexivity on experiences is indeed important in order to ground situated ethics to reality and improve our ways of working (Prosser, 2008). However, much less is said about those people who collaborate with and help us in fieldwork settings - translators, guides, research assistants, community researchers – and the ethical issues faced when trying to work participatively. Indeed, Turner (2010) points out that most studies concerning research assistants and interpreters chiefly report on concerns regarding ethnographic translation and procedures of how to work with interpreters. The 'triple subjectivity' involving interactions among researchers, research assistants and research participants (Temple and Edwards, 2002), are rarely discussed.

Yet, field assistants can be subject to varying and overlapping ethical dilemmas and choices. Using her own experiences as a research assistant, Rogers-Dillon (2005) describes compromising instincts to please the (sometimes perceived) wishes of superiors, trying to apply the academic research approach and concepts on the ground without the authority to actually adapt them to the contextual realities, difficulties of managing emotions while in the field, attempting to behave within the protocols of a research project designed by someone else, and managing conflicts in values with fellow researchers. Robson et al. (2009) evaluate some of the unintentional consequences for child researchers while working with young people on mobility in Malawi. For example, in trying to respect children's rights to be heard, some young researchers felt that attending project workshops during term-time was prejudicial to their school learning, although the research itself constituted beneficial extra-curricular training and long-term employment opportunities (Hampshire et al., 2012). Another issue was the mode and scale of payment to the child researchers, and whether payment abided by local labour laws. They found that some child researchers were economically disadvantaged by participating in the project as a result of *"complex combinations of unbalanced social relations produced by (or at least reminiscent of) employer-employee relations, Minority-Majority world relations, and/or adult-child relations"* (Robson et al, 2009, p.474). Payment to research assistants is also the focus of Molony and Hammett's (2007) honest account of research assistant experiences in Tanzania and South Africa. They recount the ethical difficulties during fieldwork arising from financial transactions and wealth asymmetries in academic researchers-local research assistant relationships and the impact on research outcomes.

In our own context, we reflect on the ethical challenges of a local research team working in a participatory research project within their own Indigenous communities of the Guyanese interior. Using Participatory Video (PV), these Indigenous local researchers were involved in a process of facilitating their community in shaping and creating their own films according to their own sense of what is important, and how

they want to be represented by the wider communities and to the outside world, including government officials and policymakers (Johansson et al., 1999). The literature highlights empowerment and agency as PV outcomes, and it stresses the importance of people playing a more active role in taking decisions on issues that have an impact on themselves and their community (e.g. LaFlamme and Singleton, 2012; Lunch and Lunch, 2006; Plush, 2012; Shaw and Robertson, 1997). PV aims to encourage collective action by addressing community issues and problems. At the same time, it can be used to reveal hidden social relations and sensitive topics. Thus, involving the intended beneficiaries, i.e. the community, throughout the research process is crucial, so as to avoid unintended, negative consequences.

Yet, a comprehensive participatory engagement is impossible when working in a community; all members cannot be involved in all research tasks simultaneously. Practical necessities require that some community members take a more active role than others. 'PV facilitators' are normally from the same community, and like field workers in other development contexts, can play a critical bridging role in terms of access to participants, language issues, culturally appropriate conduct of research, and in some cases, providing continuity beyond the study period (Wheeler, 2009; Kamuya et al., 2013). However, as discussed above, empowering particular community beneficiaries, through giving them coordinating tasks, sometimes paid employment, and greater freedom of action, can raise significant ethical issues including the potential to exploit community trust, and challenges in maintaining privacy and confidentiality in communities they are part of (True et al., 2011). This is complicated by the ethical concerns of using visual methods, such as PV, which include consent (participants being fully informed of their involvement and project purpose), ownership of images, and use and rights to reproduce them (e.g. White, 2003; Capstick, 2012).

At the same time, facilitation as a process can be approached in different ways. For example, Groot and Maarleveld (2000) compare a strategic rationality to a communicative rationality approach to facilitation in participatory interventions. Taking a strategic rationality approach, facilitation is more concerned with managing situations so as to change the behaviour of participants so that predetermined objectives can be achieved more easily. On the other hand, in communicative rationality, the emphasis is on the experiential learning process of participants and paying special attention to encouraging multiple perceptions and different forms of communicative interaction. However, in reality, these two approaches intertwine, and as such require somewhat contradictory and paradoxical skills. *"Sometimes facilitators need to follow the group's agenda, while at other times facilitators need to lead the group's agenda. Sometimes the facilitators need to question, inquire and consult, while at other times they need to direct. Sometimes facilitators need to listen; other times they need to tell people what to do. Sometimes they need to nurture and support the people in the group or community; other times they need to challenge. Sometimes facilitators need to provide structure and time boundaries; at other times they need to flex structure and time boundaries"* (Mackewn, 2008, p.5-6).

The job of the PV facilitator is therefore complex. This can be made even more complicated where the facilitator is deemed to be an 'insider'. Herr and Anderson (2005) provide a continuum of positionalities which describe the social location of researchers relative to the communities in which they work and which range from insider to outsider. They point out that the degree of insider/outsider positionality determines how researchers will frame epistemology, decide on methodology, and address ethical dilemmas that may arise. Smith (2012), problematising the insider position, contests the notion that because insiders live or have lived in the community, they 'know'. The assumption that one's own experience suffices to explain the experiences of all others that occupy a similar position may serve to invalidate the lived experiences of other community members. It also assumes the homogeneity of 'community', ascribing the term to an institution without hierarchy, power and discrimination (e.g. Walkerdine and Studdert, 2012). Yet, the term 'community' has a range of meanings and uses. It is a concept that is commonly used to identify, sometimes vague, associations between people, place, culture, history and the local environment. There is a general understanding that a 'community' shares in collective social values, responsibilities and other common attributes or interests. Research involving Indigenous people often associates the term 'community' with an ethnic group where its members share a sense of common origins, claim a common and distinctive history, possess distinctive characteristics, and feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity. A sense of 'community' can also emerge when there are clear decision-making structures where an 'authority' can legitimately represent the collective views of a certain group of people. The need for academics to pin down and reify 'community' is in stark contrast to the fluid interpretation of the term 'community' in practice by so-called community members.

Drawing on our everyday research encounters with our Project COBRA local PV team, we ('we' throughout this text refers to the authors) propose in this paper that the Indigenous researchers in our project found themselves between a rock and a hard place; stuck in a difficult situation as a consequence of differing contractual and tacit relations. Nevertheless, the fact that the project progressed, mostly in a positive direction, indicates the myriad of potential strategies they have for negotiating ethical dilemmas, which we will concentrate on in the next paragraphs. While some of these strategies have been discussed with the local PV team and are explicit, many others are most probably unknown to us (and in some cases probably to the local researchers themselves who find day to day solutions to ethical challenges often without even realizing they are doing so). We conclude with a call for greater care and ethical considerations for the way we, as academic researchers, engage with research assistants. 'Participatory research' is just about being open to the perspectives, concerns and aspirations of fellow researchers, as it is about forwarding the interests of the community beneficiaries.

### **The context of our engagement with local researchers**

The aim of Project COBRA is to integrate community owned solutions within international policies in order to address emerging social-ecological challenges, through accessible information and communication technologies (see [www.projectcobra.org](http://www.projectcobra.org)). The focus of our community engagement is the Guiana Shield

region of South America and involves ten partners across Europe and South America including civil society organisations (CSOs), research institutions, and a small/medium enterprise. As a project research team, we were composed of academics and CSO officers (mostly Europeans), and CSO practitioners and Indigenous researchers (from South America). The majority of the team, except one European academic and the Indigenous researchers, worked part-time (to various degrees) on the project. As such, any direct field visits to work with the local communities had to be juggled with other institutional demands including teaching, administration, other projects and consultancy work. In terms of the project activities and outputs, they had been discussed and agreed between project partners during the project proposal writing stage, and were deliberately kept broad and generic to allow the evolution of project activities to determine the specific nature of how the research should progress and the form of the outputs.

Integral to the project is community participation in identifying, recording and sharing community owned solutions to current and emerging challenges. We championed a participatory research approach in order to stimulate constant reflection and, if necessary, adaptation of practices, outcomes and impacts of the project (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). This was in the form of a simple 'action learning cycle' (plan, act, observe, evaluate) in as much of a participatory way as practically possible. We did not use these steps in a systematic way, but as a heuristic to encourage all project participants to collectively reflect on practice in order to learn from mistakes. Reminding people of the cycle encouraged everyone to stop and think about what we were doing and whether we were going in the right direction. This was important because right from the start of the project, we all had an awareness that we came from different traditions and understandings, and that there was a need to reflect and learn about a whole range of things: the potential transferability of abstract academic concepts for application within Indigenous communities; the cultural peculiarities of a range of Indigenous communities, and some even stranger Europeans!; the distinctive value systems, experiences and aspirations of a large, diverse team (in terms of gender, age, life experiences, education, etc); the appropriateness of introducing advanced technologies (video recording and editing) within communities that have had limited exposure to these kind of things; the practicalities of carrying out such an ambitious project within the logistics of vast distances, limited infrastructure, and extreme tropical environments; and most importantly, the general aspiration to attempt a more systemic, rather than systematic, approach to implementing the project, within a wider research and policy environment that favours a systematic approach (Bell and Morse, 2003; Shahrokh and Wheeler, 2014).

Thus, we implemented our participatory research approach in order to support reflective practice in dealing with the above challenges. All members of the project were encouraged to keep research diaries and we had dedicated sessions as a group, which included the Indigenous researchers, to reflect, and importantly record, what activities had been carried out, how they had gone, what had been changed and peoples' views on those changes and their impacts. Within the spectrum of participatory approaches, we feel that the project started from a position of

cooperation (local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities; responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process), but over time and with the changes in the local PV researchers ability and confidence, evolved to co-learning (local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create new understanding and work together to form action plans, with outsider facilitation) (see Cornwall, 1996).

### **PV in the hands of local people: the COBRA project local team**

PV and participatory photography were the main tools chosen to engage communities in recording, discussing and sharing information. The first phase of the project engaged Indigenous communities in the North Rupununi, Guyana. Community engagement was led by the local umbrella organisation, the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), and supported in-country by the Iwokrama International Centre (IIC), a national level NGO with long-term community engagement in the region. Other project partners supported the field research through visits to work face-to-face with the local team and the local communities, and remotely through email and video conferencing. Through the coordination of the NRDDB and IIC, five Indigenous people from different villages of the North Rupununi area were employed with full-time salaries to work on the project. The recruitment process involved the NRDDB and IIC drawing up person specifications for each position type, advertising these for a set period of time and then undertaking individual interviews. The objective in choosing these five people was to actively engage community members who could bring positive spill overs to their communities (in terms of acquired competences, technical skills, etc.) and to engage the community in representing their own strategies for long-term survival. Moreover, using a reflective practice and learning approach to the community research process, the project partners did not have predetermined expectations on what was the best way to engage local communities, how and what topics would be researched, what would have been the issues emerging from the community engagement, or how to carry out the analysis. It was thought that the best way to deal with all these issues was to discuss them with representatives of the community, build a local team charged with not only leading the activities collaboratively defined by the project partners, but to discuss and define how these activities would be carried out in the field.

This local PV team consisted of two women and three men. All were aged between 20 and 34 years old, and were given one year contracts by the NRDDB to be renewed after appraisal for a total period of three years. All members had a partner and/or children; the three men had wives/partners and children (one has a non-Indigenous partner), the women were lone parents of very young children. All of the team, except one man, had worked previously in an externally funded research project, some in multiple projects. The two women and one man had prior experience of using cameras, editing videos, and working in participatory projects involving their communities. One man had political responsibilities at the local (village head) and national/international level (e.g. representative on government bodies). They were therefore a diverse group with a range of experiences, skills and 'positions' in the community that they 'represented'.



Training in PV was given at the start of the project. This PV training was based on the lessons learnt from a previous pilot PV project in the North Rupununi (see Mistry and Berardi, 2012 and Mistry et al., 2014) that used some of the games and techniques from PV NGO Insightshare's handbook (see <http://insightshare.org/resources/pv-handbook>). In the COBRA project, we adapted the previous PV training approach, using activities that combined understanding of project concepts (e.g. a systems approach, indicators) with PV, while at the same time underlining the participatory and technical aspects of the methodology. This approach was condensed into a practitioner handbook which takes facilitators through a step by step path on how to identify and share community owned solutions through PV and participatory photography (Berardi et al., 2014). Following this, the local PV team worked through cycles of action learning, where they planned PV activities, storyboarded ideas, went to villages to film, reviewed the visual materials, edited them into films, and then returned to the villages to screen the drafts and gauge feedback. Although, as individuals, we were constrained by other institutional demands on how often we could go to work with the PV researchers, in the first year of the project we tried to ensure that at least one European team member was in the North Rupununi almost every other month. This tactic of 'being around' (Wollenberg et al., 2007, p.70) where intense sessions to iron-out concerns and issues, give advice, observe activities and provide feedback on the work carried out to-date, was critical for building relationships, trust and confidence in the local team.

The project as a whole was subject to a comprehensive internal ethical review by the coordinating UK university, and in Guyana by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Ministry of Amerindian Affairs, to ensure that the project was following the international rights of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) process. This national/international level ethics procedure also involved a consultation with the potential participants (in this case the Indigenous communities) and written consent from them before the project was approved. Lastly, the local team devised their own visual FPIC form and procedure to use in their community work (see Mistry and Jafferally, 2012 for more details). Although completed at different levels, all of these ethical procedures were based on the need to have a fully structured research methodology and the outputs outlined in advance, and an element of 'following the rules', in addition to responding adaptively and reflectively whilst carrying out the research.

In the following sections, we draw on the experiences during training workshops, filming, editing and screening of PV films and field visits. Our reflections are also informed by research diary entries, conversations with the local team, emails, minutes of meetings and evaluations of the research process by the local team themselves.

### **Field experiences and reflections**

*"Social relations ... form the fabric in which the dialogue, information sharing and negotiations that are central to ethical practice take place"* (Kamuya et al., 2013, p.9).

As residents of the North Rupununi, the local PV team were socially embedded in the context in which they were working. Being an 'insider' could have potential benefits

including being able to navigate the cultural norms and rules so as to create relatively safe spaces for community members to participate and reflect on their experiences (Wheeler, 2009). It was also identified as the optimal way within our project to promote ownership of the project at the local level. However, as Robson et al. (2009) reflect, trained young researchers found it difficult to negate their 'privileged' positions marked by associating with professionals and foreigners, travelling in vehicles and possessing research tools. For the local PV team, although they acknowledged that being community members themselves helped to break barriers and encourage participation, being paid by the project led to some people trying to get their favour in the hope of benefits, while others accused them of using community information to make money for themselves. For example, on several occasions the local team commented that community members felt slightly distrustful about the project and its objectives, asking what were the direct benefits for the community, why were we filming them, how would their image be used and what for, sometimes asking for payment for their participation in the PV process, and other times refusing to participate. In a similar vein, Hammett and Sporton (2012) tell of how local guides working with them in field classes in Kenya were on the receiving end of verbal attacks from villagers disgruntled by lack of payment for participation. Some villagers believed that the guides were pocketing payments for themselves, causing tensions within the community and leading to one guide re-visiting informants in the evenings to provide them with a gift or payment from his day's wages.

The local PV team knew that some community members were jealous and envious of their positions (and salaries), of the technical skills of PV they were acquiring, and of the fact that they were carrying around expensive visual equipment they could use, if they wanted to, for personal purposes. Some team members mentioned being in a 'hotspot' where their social conduct was under scrutiny. They were often expected to provide services and help out in the community, and felt that otherwise they would be the target of some kind of mischief (e.g. robbery, sabotage). Therefore the local team had to be extra careful in their behaviour during community engagement, described by one team member as follows:

*"With regards to working in the communities I have now developed some skills to deal with communities where I ensure my presence in their community is not to make money or show that I have worked to be paid. I put myself to see things as how they might see and understand and not that I am there as a paid person. I try to make them see why I am there as a friend, neighbour, and even a paid staff of a project. Few persons have made such comments but I would sometimes meet with the individual and chat one to one and hear more of his opinions and I would explain the project further".*

By employing a select group of people from the community, especially in the context of extreme inequities and marginalisation, the COBRA project could be further contributing to inequalities within the community. Few individuals have any paid employment and most livelihoods are based on subsistence lifestyles and/or remittances from relatives who have emigrated to urban settlements or are working for logging and mining enterprises. Although the selection of individuals was done by

a local institution through what seemed a fair and transparent process, it is clear that employment within the community (as opposed to being a community member employed elsewhere) shapes the experience of the local team and their broader relationships with the communities.

This situated relatedness in terms of trust, attachment and relationships, and issues of positionality of the local team are also important to understand in order to unravel how the local team obtained access to different community members and worked through the PV process. The team was made up of men and women in the hope of overcoming gendered issues when engaging participants. Having two female team members did indeed help to encourage women to participate more, but being women and young (and unmarried mothers) also meant that sometimes they were dismissed or spoken rudely to by older participants (including other women). Having a non-Indigenous partner may have resulted in one team member being viewed as having a position of 'wealth' and 'privilege' (on top of the paid salary). Another being a local and national leader (with particular political affiliations) may have prevented participants from speaking freely and/or making participants feel uncomfortable. On the other hand, when there were cash-flow issues within the local institution (officially their employer) that prevented salaries being paid, one team member, using his position and relationship within the communities and local business owners, temporarily obtained necessary items such as fuel and food to ensure planned activities and field work could happen and not have work delayed due to the lack of finances.

These complex issues of trust, relationships and positionality were coupled with constant logistical and equipment factors that ranged from transportation failing to turn up, lack of attendance by community participants after setting appointments, and breakdown of computers as a result of difficult environmental conditions. Navigating the various problems and interests can be both time-consuming and frustrating, and the 'ethics of participation' in some instances may have been compromised by the local team imposing decisions on the PV process. For example, gaining consent was an important aspect of the local team's approach. The visual nature of PV (lack of anonymity, confidentiality) concerned some community members, and there were instances when people either refused or were reluctant to participate. The local team explained to us that they made considerable effort to discuss and explain the PV process and consent procedures, which would have allowed a community member to withdraw any information submitted by them from evolving video drafts. In many cases, people were reassured of their control over the information which they provided, and therefore enthusiastically participated in the research. But in a context where reciprocity is a core principle of social relations, and people have 'workshop fatigue' (from various projects with no tangible, immediate benefits such as ours), we wonder to what extent the community researchers had to come up with alternative 'benefits'? Their physical, familial and cultural proximity to the participants may have placed them in the difficult position of having to negotiate implicit and explicit expectations (Chantler et al., 2013; Mistry et al., 2014). Transportation, for example, is limited and difficult in the region, and the local team had access to vehicles and boats (with engines). In addition, most of the local team had their own modes of (fast)

transportation, including motorcycles and a jeep. We observed community participants being given rides both for project activities and in other non-project related instances. So, although not explicitly raised with the team, we wonder to what degree participation and consent was negotiated through current and future reciprocal favours?

Turner (2010) points out that there is broad spectrum of positioning factors at play in the field for research assistants/interpreters, including ethnicity and gender. In the context of Vietnam and China, she found that it was not easy for her young women research assistants to face up to a government official and try to elicit information. Obtaining information and interacting with locals involved intricate negotiations and relationships, many constructed and deliberated on-the-spot, and mostly unknown to the overseas researcher. Molony and Hammett (2007) describe how one of their well-qualified female research assistants in Tanzania was constantly and openly taunted by male youths accusing her of being a prostitute working with rich white men. In our case, we are aware that married women might not have been allowed to participate in the project, as it implies extensive travelling outside of the community with male colleagues. Indeed, in a context where close 'professional' working relationships between men and women are not so common, the young women researchers in the local team were especially scrutinised when leaving the community to travel to other regions. In addition, can we make the assumption that because they are in their own community or country that their tasks are easier to fulfil?

One aspect of the COBRA project has involved the local PV team visiting other Indigenous communities within Guyana and around the Guiana Shield to share their best practices. They have evidently been in very 'foreign' and unfamiliar situations and surroundings for the first time and away from family and friends. These fieldwork trips were a challenge for the local team; on one hand they were proud of the results they achieved in training other Indigenous people in the Guiana Shield, and on the other hand they experienced the vulnerability, fear and uneasiness of travelling and being away from home. During one of these trips a female Indigenous researcher experienced harassment by some young male guides accompanying the team on an excursion. We had naïvely assumed that she was 'one of us' during the trip, and therefore expected that she would receive the same level of respect that we, male and female researchers, take for granted when we go into Indigenous communities. However, the guides clearly felt that the female Indigenous researcher was 'one of them', and therefore felt free to harass her just like any other single Indigenous woman staying away from her parental household. Even though we were able to safeguard her from any further consequences, the situation she experienced was unpleasant. Was it 'ethical' from our (wider partners) side to ask a young unmarried girl to join the trip? In our attempt at treating her the same way as Indigenous male researchers, were we over estimating the 'protective' effects of her membership within the research team and, as a consequence, putting her in a dangerous/uneasy situation?

Yet, there is another, positive side to these very same exchanges/visits for the local Indigenous facilitators. It was clear that distant Indigenous communities had stronger

affinities with the community researchers compared to the way we (academics) were perceived. The community researchers would automatically be invited to informal social events as is characteristic of Indigenous cultures in the region, where many individuals still practise semi-nomadic lifestyles, and often 'visit' long distant relatives. On the other hand, we, as non-Indigenous foreign researchers, were not invited so readily to social events, and were treated more formally.

The literature on PV highlights the process as flexible and fluid allowing people to take part in activities on their own terms (e.g. Johansson et al., 1999). However, the reality on the ground is much more complicated, and the extent to which the local team were enabling the communities to engage with participation on 'their own terms' or trying to mediate between different interests, shifted over time. At the beginning of the project, the local team was in a 'learning' mode: building their capacity with regards to the project goals, the conceptual foundations of the project, acquiring technical skills on PV and participatory photography. As the project went on, implementation of actions was left more and more to the local team, especially concerning the use of visual methods and adapting these methods and related activities to the local context. However, sometimes it was clear that the local team felt that they did not have the competence, the knowledge, or the experience. They were worried about taking the wrong decisions and of not being able to fulfil our (wider partners) expectations of them. Questions such as *"are we doing it in the correct way?"*, *"Can you teach us?"* or *"Can you ask Andrea [UK-based academic participant in the project] if we are doing system viability [a project concept] correctly?"* were regularly solicited. These quotes highlight some of the ethical issues of 'handing over the stick' and the stress it can create (Mistry et al., 2009; Shaw, 2012; Yang, 2012). We assumed that as the local team were trained, their ability to carry out certain project activities would progress at a steady and incremental pace. Perhaps we needed to be more critically aware on whether they were really acquiring the research skills we expected – as Chambers (1994) puts it in the context of 'handing over the stick' in participatory rural appraisal, *"it requires confidence that "they can do it""* (p.1254).

As the project progressed, there was a strong ethical challenge for the local team in making sure that the objectives of the project were achieved. This issue appeared very clearly in a particular step of the project that involved choosing and documenting community best practices for confronting current and emerging challenges. Working collaboratively with us, the team had to choose a series of best practices and then investigate these through PV. Since these best practices needed to be shown to other Indigenous communities outside the North Rupununi in the next phase of the project, there was discussion on what features the films should have: more care should be taken towards the quality of the footage in order to support public engagement; the film should show clearly and step-by-step the best practice so that it can be replicable in another community; the film should present a local champion telling the audience about the best practice; the film should be as practical as possible (i.e. minimise the amount of 'talking heads' and instead show the viewer the objects or actions being discussed). With these (what we thought were) basic guidelines, the team was left to carry out what turned out to be a very tricky step of the project. Indeed, what we assumed would be *"telling the story of a solution thanks to the interview of one*

champion that would be willing to transmit his/her knowledge” turned out to be a much more complex task. Several of the identified champions turned out to be reluctant in participating in the project, there was limited time in order to produce the best practice videos and photostories, and the team often set out to capture the best practice without knowing exactly what they were going to find. When we were asked to provide some feedback, we immediately detected that some of the guidelines had not been followed; the steps to replicate the practice were not clear; there were lots of ‘talking head’ interviews compared to images illustrating the practice; and sometimes the champions were missing altogether within the best practice materials.

This illustrates how the broader framing of an output that needed to be followed was a source of anxiety for the local team, never quite sure whether they were doing the right or wrong thing, because even if we said “there is no right or wrong”, in fact we provided feedback that encouraged them to produce what we thought was a “more appropriate/more accessible” video and photostory. This frustration is captured by two team members when they say:

*“You know, we’re left on our own working on this for months, without guidance, and then when we show something, suddenly we have to change everything”, and*

*“I’m just going to ask them [the wider team] to come here and do it themselves”.*

These comments, although valuing the feedback provided by the wider team, express the tension between the different expectations of the COBRA members and the pressures on the local team to work within the externally defined boundaries of the project. And they implicitly demonstrate the conflict academic researchers experience between wanting to give the local team freedom in deciding how to carry out the research and expressing their views, and at the same time wanting to provide them with the guidance and help they need and ask for. Nevertheless, over time, the local team did become more confident in allowing their own views and creative processes to determine project activities. They started to understand that we had no expectations that there was “only one right way of doing things” and that they could provide more nuanced and locally appropriate approaches compared to those of non-local researchers because of their contextual knowledge and experience. As one Indigenous team member pointed out during one of the last fieldtrips aimed at sharing community best practices with other communities:

*“I felt that every fieldtrip I do is better and I am more confident”.*

Another one, similarly, said:

*“I’m not scared no more if things don’t go as planned, I know I can adapt and find alternatives”.*

The Indigenous team’s confidence grew also when they started noticing that during fieldwork they were more effective than the European researchers in conveying the project messages when they allowed themselves to be creative in their own ways, drawing on their Indigenous culture, on their knowledge, and their experiences. As in

a virtuous cycle, the more confident they felt, the more they were effective in carrying out PV activities, which resulted in even greater confidence, and so forth. By the end of the project each facilitator had developed her/his own way of engaging with the communities and carrying out PV and participatory photography, not needing to rely as much on the European researchers' inputs.

Yet, as the local team became more confident, and took the research into their own hands, there were dilemmas of expecting the local team to represent both 'academia' and the 'community'. We became increasingly concerned with the ethics of changing the role of these community members to the status of 'researchers' and its associated culture (e.g. methodology, abstract concepts, consent forms, paid employment), while still expecting them to represent, and be fully integrated within, the communities they live in. This was highlighted during one of the exchanges with another Indigenous community; it was noted by a non-Indigenous facilitator with long-term collaboration with Indigenous communities, that the local team displayed quite Western approaches to facilitation when presenting concepts and techniques, but at the same time had what she called very "Indigenous ways" of doing things. Was their "Western approach" due to our influence limiting their own ways of expression? From the non-Indigenous facilitator's comment it seems more likely that the PV local team were developing Indigenous ways of re-elaborating Western concepts, due to their increasing confidence in the "Western approach", in themselves, and particularly in the project's participatory approach, which calls for their re-interpretation and re-adaptation of tools, concepts and activities in the way they felt and judged to work better.

We also reflected on the potential for a permanent change in the way these community members would be perceived, after the project had finished, and their paid employment would have ceased. As a team member stated when discussing their future plans once the project was over:

"I want to be a resource for my community, I don't want what I have learned and what I became through the project to get lost".

Another team member said:

"I had never worked in an office before and now I feel I am a researcher, and I want to continue researching for the sake of my community".

These quotes suggest that a multiple, fluid subjectivity is being built where the researcher's new identity blends with those of being Indigenous, a community member, etc. What would be the long-term consequences for these individuals' participation in the research project? What would they feel "to be" once the project is over: researchers, community facilitators, community members, something "new" and different? And how will their communities see them: as resource people, as leaders, as traitors, as insiders or as outsiders? What would this imply for their lives? Indeed, the academic literature is quite silent on the fate of community researchers once a research project has finished (with some exceptions, for example Kindon, 2003 and Hume-Cook et al., 2007). We are aware that we are further empowering (mostly)

previously empowered people. Although the team members were recruited based on a transparent process, we cannot fail to notice that most of them had been part of projects in the past and our project is further enhancing their skills that will give the team members greater chances of accessing jobs in the future. The salary received is also a great opportunity for the team members to invest in personal projects/business after the project ends.

The issues discussed in this section illustrate that the research outputs, in this case the audio-visual material presented in the PV films and photostories, is determined by evolving and dynamic processes at the community level, and that participation and obtaining consent is not a straight-forward process. The agency of local researchers' influences how data is produced which in turn is shaped by the multiple and fluid roles they assume, mediating the relations between researcher and "researched" (Dyck et al. 1995). And as Turner (2010) states "it is not always immediately obvious to Western researchers that careful negotiations and social positioning are being undertaken by research assistants, as well as the potential stress and anxiety that this can cause. More reflection by researchers upon these dynamics could potentially lead to reduced faux pas in the field, and a more positive work relationship between researcher and research assistant. Yet, at the same time, it is naïve to think that one's research assistant is likely to voice concerns or anxieties over interviewing style or their role openly, especially if they are dependent on the researcher for immediate employment, advancement in their (state) career or a letter of recommendation. Researchers must ascertain discreetly and diplomatically how the research assistant is viewing fieldwork and any concerns he or she might have" (p. 213).

The challenges of doing the kind of participatory research described in this paper and having local teams that may have different ideas about the research / are embedded in particular power relations / have pressure to produce 'deliverables', are manifold and complex. Yet, our attempt to surface an array of ethical difficulties allows us to reflect more deeply with the 'triple subjectivity' (Temple and Edwards, 2002) that is ongoing in any fieldwork, and hopefully makes for better research outcomes for all: the communities; the community researchers; and other research partners.

## **Conclusions**

Fuller and Kitchin talk about the 'dance of the academic',

*"wherein academics can be perceived as being caught in a series of different 'dances' (teacher, supervisor, mentor, administrator, committee member, chairperson, researcher, writer, editor, reviewer, advisor, examiner, manager, conference organiser, activist), set to different 'tunes' (university, students, colleagues, collaborators, contributors, publishers, committees, academic bodies, research and funding agencies, research participants)" (2004, p.8).*

Similarly, we find that the local PV team wear multiple hats (community member, researcher, facilitator, video technician, Indigenous person, leader, woman, father) to please various interests (their families, the wider community, local and national NGOs,



academic researchers). As they mediate between these fluid, multiple identities while undertaking the participatory research, they are potentially stuck between a rock and a hard place; the community members are unhappy with them; the academic researchers are unhappy with them; they themselves are unhappy with their own capacities for producing the work and satisfying everybody's needs. They are stuck in the middle of a web of different networks. However, the fact that the local team are constructively able to face these challenges, and continued to persevere with the research, suggests that they are engaging with their communities and the research project at a deep emotional level; they understand and appreciate what participatory research is trying to achieve.

Our reflections also reveal that there are tensions between the inconsistencies and conflicts of participatory research on the ground, and the scientific/ ethical rules of academic establishments. How research approaches unfold on the ground can be unexpected and difficult to predict in advance and therefore challenging to incorporate into initial ethical plans required by institutional bodies (Cahill et al., 2007). Participatory research is 'emergent' and does not fit neatly into the predefined formulations so loved by formal ethical approval processes (Martin, 2007). The reality of the local team mixing the private and the professional removes the 'ordered' separations upon which formal ethics and scientific evidence rest. Negotiating ethical concerns in social relations requires a degree of openness and flexibility, and opportunities for local team members to articulate the complex and uncertain challenges arising from their personal encounters across the dividing line between researchers and researched (Banks et al., 2013; Carter et al., 2013). It also needs considerable support from us (wider partners) to help them reflect on their work and their modes of engagement and to be critical listeners when trying to manage complex community dynamics. As one team member said,

*"The team feel more encouraged when partners visits more frequently as they feel part of a bigger picture on the project. New ideas and directions are explored from the different backgrounds when local ideas and academic ideas are joined".*

It is clear that, when it comes to ethics, filling in forms and following institutional guidelines simply does not cater for the complex moral dilemmas which community researchers find themselves in. Getting community members to engage with and sign consent forms, as a one-off exercise at the beginning of a community participatory process, will not resolve the challenges we have described in this paper. What we are instead proposing is the establishment of a number of ethical principles which can be shared amongst all participants, from academics to community members, which will underpin the practices of community researchers. These could include the following:

- Community researchers will be fully informed about the potential issues they might face within their position as a community researcher before starting the project;
- Community researchers will not be asked to take part in, and have a right to withdraw from, any activity which could undermine their reputation and standing within their local community;

- Community researchers will not be asked to take part in, and have a right to withdraw from, any activity which could prejudice the interests of the local community as a whole;
- Community researchers will not be asked to take part in, and have a right to withdraw from, any activity which could result in a product which can then be sold and whose benefits will not be shared with the local community.

These principles could then be enshrined in the practices of any project through, for example, an arrangement where these are read out and discussed in a public meeting to the wider community or depicted in a PV film and screened to the wider community, and where a written version is signed by the commissioning project coordinators, the community researchers, and community leaders. We are aware that stating the above ethical principles will not automatically mean they are followed. The situation is much more subtle and multifaceted; how to judge, for example, when an activity might undermine the local researcher's reputation or prejudice the community's interests? It would be naive to believe that communities always think 'homogeneously'. Indeed, different community members had different perspectives on different community researchers and the project as a whole. And how to act in order to prevent these problems emerging in the first place? Moreover, all these principles could be applied to the letter and yet the local team could still find themselves in awkward, unpleasant situations.

Nevertheless, this framework might provide an explicit ethical basis through which participatory research can be carried out by community researchers and could help ethical problems and issues to come to the open. In this perspective, it could contribute to creating a clearer perception among local researchers of the ethical dilemmas they might find themselves dealing with during a research project and it could help to foster reflections and exchanges with other project partners on how to deal with issues as they emerge.

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